HOW THE NIV HANDLES THE NAME OF "JEHOVAH"

By Paul Lorenzen
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There is the claim by some[1] that the ***New International Version*** of the Bible has deleted the term Jehovah, the name of God, from the Old Testament text. This claim is not true.

In the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, the name of God, originally translated into the English language as "Jehovah," is formed by the four Hebrew letters transliterated as "YHWH." These four letters are referred to as the "**tetragrammaton**" or "the four letters." The Hebrew script for these as found, for example, in Gen. 2:4, the first occurrence of the term, is shown below.[2]

[4] These are the generations of the heaven and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made earth and heaven.

4 אֵלֶּה תוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבָּרְאָם
בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמָיִם׃

The letters in the red boxes are the first occurrence of the tetragrammaton in the Hebrew Bible. The NIV translates these four letters with the word "LORD" with all capital letters instead of using lower case letters. This follows the traditions of all major English translations of the bible including the 1611 ***King James Version.***

First, you need to notice that in the Hebrew text, there are the "main" letters, then there are smaller markings below, above and inside some of the "main" letters. The main letters are consonants. The original Hebrew written language script did not contain any vowels so only the consonants were written. The vowels used to vocalize the words were understood by a native Hebrew speaker just as a native English speaker would be able to vocalize and understand the following English sentence without vowels (especially with contemporary "texting" abbreviations!):

Whn wll y b hm fr dnnr?

As fewer people could remember how the Hebrew words were pronounced, the Jewish rabbis decided that it was important to create a system that would preserve the pronunciation but would not disturb the inspired text represented by the consonants. Thus, they developed a system called vowel pointing which put in the vowel sounds below, above and inside the consonants (as can be seen in the above Hebrew text) without disturbing the consonants.

However, long before the vowel markings were developed, the Jewish people had ceased pronouncing the name of God represented by the tetragrammaton as the name was considered too sacred to pronounce. Therefore, when encountering the tetragrammaton in the text, the Jewish reader would pronounce the word "Lord" instead. That word in Hebrew is "adonai." Thus, when the vowel pointing system was incorporated, the vowel markings for "adonai" were inserted around the four letters of

[1] The claim is primarily made by Jehovah's Witnesses but there are others with a similar criticism.
[2] The English translation is that found in the Jewish **Tanach**.

God's name instead of the markings that might represent the original pronunciation. This resulted in a "hybrid" in which we have the consonants of the name of God surrounded by the vowels of the term "adonai" or "lord."

To see what this really means, let's suppose you had two friends. One was named Robert and the other was name William. If you were to take the consonants from the Robert's name and combine them with the vowels of William's name you would end up with ***Ribiart***. Supposed you wanted to address one of them and called out "Ribiart," would either Robert or William recognize the name and answer you? *Most likely not*! The end result of using the hybrid name is that it has no resemblance to either Robert or William and would not be recognizable by either Robert or William!

Even today, if you visit Israel, or visit a Jewish worship service in a temple in America, you will hear the Jewish people substitute the term "adonai" or the term "ha shem" when encountering the tetragrammaton in their worship readings of the text. The term "ha shem" translates as "the name."

When the first English translators wrestled with this issue, one of the solutions was to translate using both consonants and vowels as found in the text which then came out as "Jehovah." The first letter (***yod*** in the Hebrew text) was transliterated as a "J" and the third letter (***vav*** in the Hebrew) transliterated as a "v" because the system used for transliteration was developed at that time by German scholars and that transliteration fit the German language.

However, more modern transliteration systems developed by English speaking scholars transliterate the yod as a "y" and the vav as a "w" which fits English better. So even the transliteration as *Yahweh* (often used in contemporary literature) is a ***hybrid of a hybrid***!

Additionally, Jewish scholars today in Israel, using modern Hebrew pronunciation, would transliterate the yod as "y" and the vav as "v" making the word "**Yahveh**."

Thus, the original transliteration of "Jehovah" is a German transliteration and the English transliteration would be "Yahweh." But contemporary Jewish transliteration would be "Yahveh." However, it is important to remember that ***all three of these are transliterating the Hebrew consonants of the name of God and the vowels of the Hebrew word "adonai" (lord). None of the three is actually transliterating or translating the actual original name of God*** because by the time that the vowel system was invented the original pronunciation of the tetragrammaton had long been forgotten.

In honoring the long Jewish tradition, the translators of the major English translations, from the King James Version to the New International Version, have used the word "LORD" using ***all capital letters*** to indicate the presence of the actual name of God represented by the tetragrammaton. When they encounter the Hebrew word "adonai" it is translated as either "Lord" or "lord" using the upper or lower case ***first*** letter (depending on context) to indicate that this is not an occurrence of the actual name of God.

This tradition actually goes back to ***before the time of Christ***! One of the first translations of the Hebrew Old Testament into another language was the **Septuagint** translation. This translation was into ***Koine***

Greek, which was also the language of the New Testament, and was probably made in Alexandria, Egypt, about 200 B.C. In this translation, the Hebrew name of God was translated as "kurios" which is the Greek word for "lord" and the equivalent of the Hebrew word "adonai." This is evidence of the substitution of the word "adonai" for the name of God as much as 200 years before the birth of Jesus Christ!

Of further interest is the reading by Jesus of Isaiah 61:1 as described in Luke 4:18 where it says "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." The actual Hebrew text from which Jesus read is best translated: "The spirit of the Lord God [adonai elohim] is upon me; Because the ***Lord*** [yhwh] hath anointed me To bring good tidings unto the humble;" [Jewish Tanach English translation] The first occurrence of "lord" is the Hebrew "anonai" and the ***second*** occurrence is the **actual name of God**, the tetragrammaton! If Jesus read this in the original Hebrew (undoubtedly), he would have substituted the word "adonai" for the name of God. We know that because had he actually pronounced the name, he would have been rejected ***for that reason*** instead of simply being rejected as a home-town boy. ***In fact, he probably would have been stoned for committing a sacrilege!***

Therefore, the NIV and other English translations have not removed the name of God, as alleged by some, but rather is honoring the age-old tradition of the Jewish people by not spelling out the name of God but substituting the word **LORD** so that the reader ***will not accidentally mispronounce the sacred name.***

Those who insist on using the term Jehovah *may actually be committing the sacrilege* that the original Jewish religious leaders were so intent on avoiding. If it is a sacrilege to mispronounce the name of God, and we do not actually know for sure how the name is to be pronounced, then *any attempt* to attribute the name as "Jehovah" or "Yahweh" *would be to require the reader/speaker to commit that sacrilege!* In fact, since the name Jehovah is, as pointed out earlier, *a hybrid of a hybrid*, even if it *were* acceptable to pronounce the name of God, using this transliterated pronunciation would be even more insulting to God because of effectively ***mangling the pronunciation***!

Thus, those who insist on using the term "Jehovah" ***may be committing the actual sin*** of which they accuse the rest of Christianity of committing.

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About the Author: Paul Lorenzen is a graduate of Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri. Over the years, he has served in numerous lay ministries, as well as an associate pastor and pastor in several Nazarene churches. During his seminary career, he studied under Dr. Ralph Earle, who was chairman of the New Testament translation committee for the ***New International Version*** and assisted Dr. Earle in the preparation of the preliminary manuscript of the NIV translation of the Gospel of Matthew.